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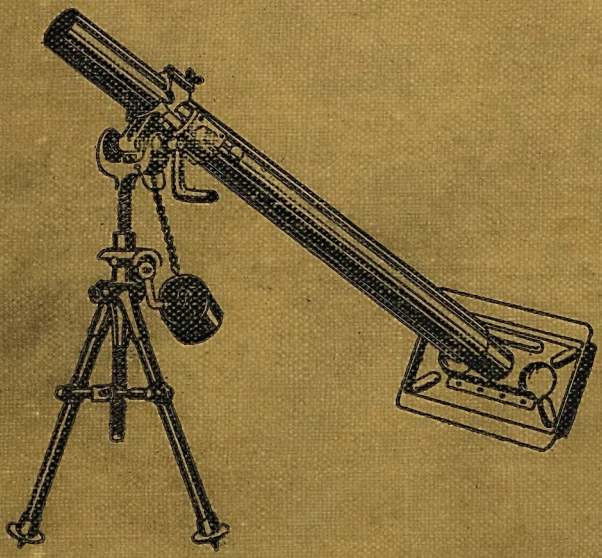
WITH THE N.Z. TRENCH MORTARS IN FRANCE



W. E. L. NAPIER

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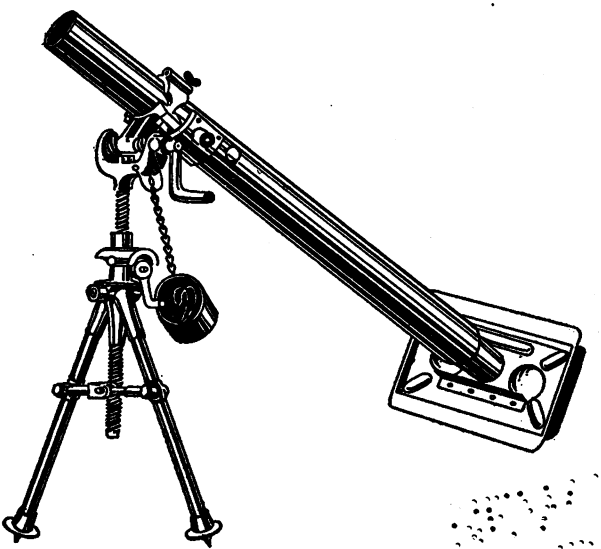

BY

CAPT. W. E. L. NAPIER, M.C.

2ND BATTAL. AUCKLAND REGT.

N.Z.E.F.

(1ST AND 4TH LIGHT T.M. BATTERIES)

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FOREWORD BY
COL.-COMMANDANT C. W. MELVILL, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.

As an Infantry Officer, I am very glad of the opportunity of expressing the gratitude of the Infantry to officers, non-commissioned officers, and men of the Light Trench Mortar Batteries for the magnificent work they performed, from their formation in 1917 to the end of the War.

The *personnel*, drawn originally from the Infantry, knew the difficulties Infantry had to face, and it was owing to their gallantry, keenness, and devotion to duty that many a victory was gained and casualties lessened. In attack, defence, and trench warfare, their services were invariably called upon, and they never failed.

It was in attack, perhaps, that they shone most brightly. Moving forward with, or

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very close to the leading waves on innumerable occasions they were able to prevent the attack being held up. It was wonderful what a few well-directed rounds would accomplish. Infantry commanders invariably asked for the assistance of "L Toc Emmas" prior to an advance, as they knew their great value.

I can honestly say that I know of no other unit who held together better, or who were so wedded to their weapon.

It would be invidious to mention names when all did so well, and I feel sure that when the deeds of the New Zealand Division come under discussion those of the L.T.M. Batteries will always hold a leading place, and will never be forgotten.

C. W. MELVILL,
Col.-Comdt.

H.Q. Central Command,
Palmerston North,
25th September, 1923.

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INTRODUCTION

THE following account of the work of the Light Trench Mortars in France is given in order that the usefulness in the Great War of this wonderful invention of Stokes may be more widely known in New Zealand than at present is the case. The information given in the following pages is all of more or less value because it has been gained from personal experience in the field in France and with the help of official war diaries of different batteries engaged both in trench warfare and in attack, and these batteries are considered to have taken part in more offensive actions than any other batteries in the whole British Army, commencing from Armentières in February, 1916, right up to the end of the War.

To impress on the reader the value of the Stokes Mortar, which the British War Office

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considered to be our greatest war invention, it is only necessary to give the following extract from the London *Daily Mail* of Mr. Kellaway's (Secretary to the Ministry of Munitions) speech in the House of Commons after the Armistice on the usefulness of the weapon in the tragic early days of the War:—

"Now the Peace Treaty was signed," said Mr. Kellaway, "it was in the public interest that information about the early days should be given. Up to June, 1915, only 314 Trench Mortars had been issued to the Army, and these were types which the soldiers themselves had developed in France. The Trench Mortar position was saved very largely as the result of the invention of a civilian, Mr. Wilfred Stokes, who had an experience of official inertia which would have broken the heart of a man less confident.

"The Stokes Gun was taken up by the Ministry of Munitions, and in August, 1915, Mr. Lloyd George placed an order for 1000

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(the total number issued during the war was 20,000).

"Owing to the shortage of proper Trench Mortars in the first months of the war, large numbers of Catapults were sent out to the Armies.

"Up to the end of 1915, 3000 were issued, and it was these primitive catapults and with grenades improvised from bully beef tins that the British soldier was expected to defend himself. How much blood would have been saved, how different the history of the War, how fewer would have been the British graves in France, if only the decision that was taken after the shambles of Festubert had been taken nine months earlier, when the shortage of essential munitions was known to all who had access to official documents."

Very little has been said in any other book written during or since the War, not even in the History of the N.Z.E.F., nor in the history of any of its regiments, of the Trench Mortars

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or their work, and, therefore, without making this little brochure an effort for people to read by supplying a lot of technical detail, I think it preferable to narrate in simple language some of the principal achievements of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force with this wonderful invention of Sir Wilfred Stokes, after its introduction to the Army.

W. E. L. NAPIER.

Devonport, Auckland, N.Z.
November, 1923.

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CHAPTER I

THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THE TRENCH MORTAR

UNTIL early in the Great War, Trench Mortars were called Trench Howitzers, as they have a high angle of fire and the propelling charge is varied.

They were first used in the War by the Germans at Liège, and were a heavy pattern Howitzer, firing a big shell, useful for wrecking fortifications. The Bosche again used them at Ypres when he first used poison gas, and the type was a tin canister holding about 180lb. of high explosive and a rod at the end. Bombs came into use about that time, and then the smaller type of Trench Mortar was gradually adopted.

It was found that craters and saps could not be reached with bombs, and a sort of drain-pipe was brought into use that fired black

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powder, and then a bomb for a distance of 200 or 300 yards. These weapons were extremely unpopular with the Infantry, as they continually burst. The Royal Engineers supplied the personnel. Then the 4-inch and 3.7-inch weapons came into use, and were worked by the Royal Garrison Artillery. The 4-inch had a range of 600 yards, had a rifled barrel, was fired by guncotton, and threw a shell weighing 8lb. It had an artillery pattern fuse, which alone cost three times as much as a Stokes shell complete. The 3.7-inch was a similar weapon with a range of 400 yards, fired by guncotton, and threw a bomb weighing 4½ pounds. They were very dangerous, owing to the barrels frequently bursting. The principle on which they were fired was that the charge of guncotton was dropped into the barrel by a T tube or rifle mechanism and a blank cartridge. There were two guns to a division and the 3-7-inch was the first mortar to be brigaded, and there

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were four guns to a Brigade, usually worked by the Royal Garrison Artillery.

At the Battle of Loos (15th September, 1915) Trench Mortars became better known and were used with considerable effect.

We intended to use the 2-inch Trench Mortar and the Stokes Light Trench Mortar, which had not been long invented, and of which there were very few yet in France, in this battle, but the organisation went to pieces. The first time they were actually used was at the Bluff, South of Ypres, on February 16, 1916, when they did wonderful work, and by this time the Stokes Mortar had made good, but had seldom been seen in the trenches.

The Bosche realised the possibilities of the Trench Mortar, and organised a battery to every brigade, and about the same time we armed our brigades as fast as possible with mortars, beginning with the Fourth Army. The personnel of the batteries were volun-

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teers from the Infantry, and they went through one week's course of training, and were then sent into the line. Thus it may be seen that the early training of batteries was rather rough and ready, but, notwithstanding this drawback, surprisingly good work was accomplished by them.

Very soon the Stokes Mortars were in full swing, and the Bosche had nothing to approach the Stokes, either in mobility or rapidity of fire, for this wonderful invention of ours could throw 40 shells per minute, although the average was not so high as that. At first it was impossible to take the mortars across with the Infantry in the attack, but much was learned in the Battle of the Somme, where they were very useful, and our New Zealand Batteries did extraordinarily good work in blowing out enemy machine guns and strong posts that were holding up the attack.

A Division at this time had three batteries of 3.2-inch Stokes Trench Mortars—one bat-

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tery to each brigade, and each battery consisted of eight guns with four officers and about 60 other ranks.

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CHAPTER II

THE LIGHT TRENCH MORTAR ITSELF

BEFORE proceeding to describe the usefulness of the Mortars in the later warfare, and where and how they were used by the British Forces in general and by the New Zealand Division in particular, I think that a description of the Mortars is desirable at this point, as very few people know much about them.

The Stokes 3-2in. Mark II Light Trench Mortar consists chiefly of three parts—

1. A base plate.
2. The barrel.
3. An A-shaped elevating stand.

1. THE BASE PLATE is made of compressed steel with three depressions for the reception of the base cap and for rapid deflection. The ledge below the depressions keeps the base

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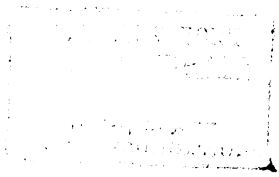

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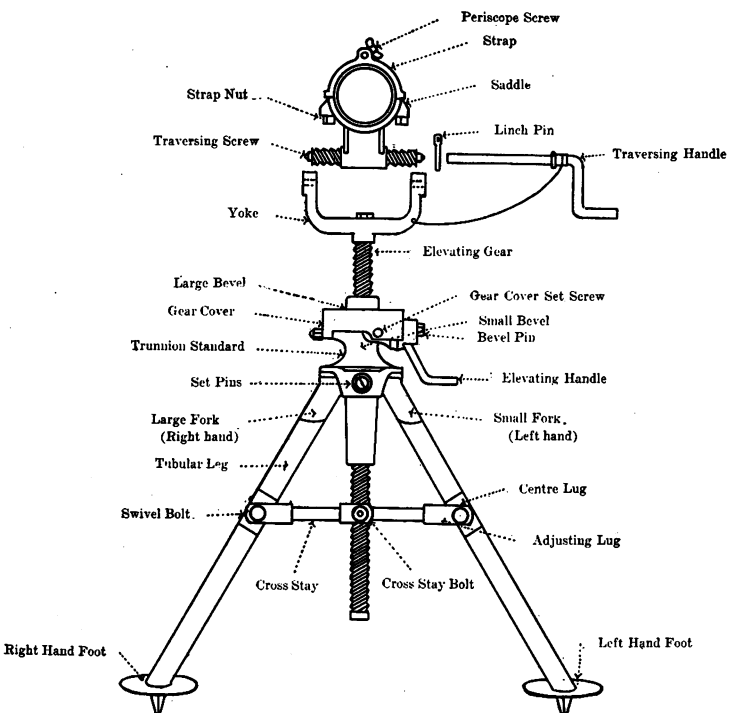

The 3.2 Stokes Trench Mortar, able to fire 35 shells per minute, each weighing 10lb. 11oz., at maximum range of 840 yards.

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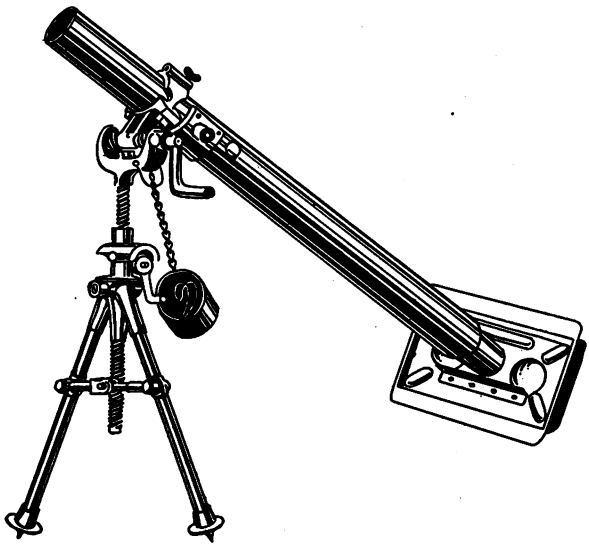

Elevation Stand for Stokes Mortar

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cap from jumping out when firing. It has five ribs for strengthening purposes, and the top and bottom is lipped to prevent it from sinking into the ground. The weight of the base plate is 29 pounds.

2. THE BARREL is made of drawn steel not rifled, and screwed on to the bottom is a base cap, into which is screwed a striker (central fire). Up the side of the barrel is a white line for sighting purposes. On the left side is a safety device for smoke or gas bombs. Nine inches from the top is a steel strap, and on the strap a periscope socket and butterfly screw for holding the periscope, while fitted to the strap is a saddle which holds the traversing screw. The top of the barrel is bevelled for the easy insertion of the shell, and attached by a string is a leather or canvas muzzle cover, which is kept on when not firing. The length of the barrel is 51 inches, and its weight 48 pounds.

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3. A-SHAPED ELEVATED STAND has two legs made of tubular steel, and at the bottom of the legs is a disc or spike to keep the legs steady, while half-way up the stand is a cross stay, which is folding and adjustable. Up the centre is the elevating screw operated by a gear and handle, the gear being covered with a gear cover, while below the elevating gear is the Trunnion standard. At the top of the screw is fitted the yoke, which engages the traversing screw each side of the saddle, and the screw is operated by a traversing handle. Two lugs on the handle fit into the cut-away part of the screw, and a Lynch pin keeps the handle secure. The weight of the stand is 26 pounds (reinforced model, 32 pounds).

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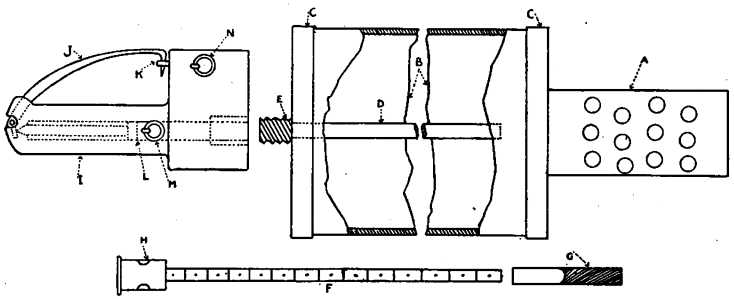

A. The Stokes Shell. B. Slow-burning Bickford Fuse.

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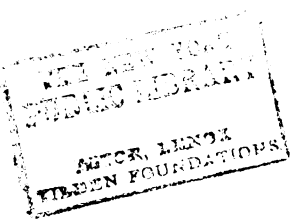
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CHAPTER III

EQUIPMENT OF THE NEW ZEALANDERS

THE New Zealand Expeditionary Force was first equipped with Stokes Trench Mortars at Armentieres early in 1916. It was decided by the Headquarters of the New Zealand Division in April of that year to inaugurate three batteries, and four representatives—two officers and two N.C.O.'s—were sent from each brigade of the Division to a Trench Mortar school at Erquehiem, about eight miles from Hazebrouck, for a course of instruction, and these officers and N.C.O.'s later acted as instructors to their respective batteries.

The New Zealand batteries experienced the same difficulties about firing at first as the English, Canadian, and Australian batteries had experienced. The Infantry complained that the trench mortars made it impossible to keep a sector of the line quiet, and as orders

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were issued that, whatever happened, no gun was to fall into the enemy's hands it was necessary when a raid was likely to take place against any portion of the line we were holding to remove the guns from the front line.

At first they were removed every night to a prepared position in the support line. No battery fired more than ten rounds per gun per day, and in some cases so strong was the hostility shown to the gunners that days passed without a round being fired. Meanwhile the men carried out firing practice in the fields to the west of Armentieres, and as they learnt to understand the guns their enthusiasm for the new weapon grew stronger day by day.

Early in June it was decided that raids should be carried out at the same time as the Australian attack at Flerbaix and Levanté. To the 1st Battalion of the Wellington Regiment fell the task of conducting a raid from the Mushroom sector on the La Chappelle front. It was arranged between General Earl

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Johnston, Colonel Hart, and Captain Morgan were in advance signalling to the mortars at that the trench mortars should co-operate with the infantry, and accordingly two guns, under the control of Lieut. A. R. C. Smart, with 200 rounds of ammunition engaged in the preliminary bombardment. At nine o'clock 60 mortars opened fire simultaneously with the Artillery. In the opening stages Lieut. Smart was severely wounded by machine-gun fire and had to be taken away, Captain Morgan, who was present, taking command and acting as observer. The Stokes kept up a barrage about 40 yards in front of the Infantry, and as soon as the raiding party were in the German trench the length was increased on to the communication trenches. The German artillery was quickly on to the mortars and subjected them to a heavy fire, in which Captain Morgan was the only one injured, but only sustaining slight cuts about the arms. The raid was a most successful one, and the

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Infantry were loud in their praise of the mortars when the raiding party returned. From then on the attitude of the battalion commanders towards the trench mortars underwent a marked change. The guns were asked to fire on every conceivable occasion and on all sorts of objects, the work of demolishing strong points and snipers' "possies" being a main feature of the work. A daily straafe, however, did not become a fixed institution until after the Battle of the Somme. During the remainder of the summer of that year our trench mortars did very heavy damage to the Bosche trenches in that sector until the Division left for the Somme.

The continuous daily harrassing fire of several of our mortar batteries on to the enemy front and support lines had a tremendous moral effect on the Hun, besides killing many Huns and destroying their trenches, blowing up machine guns and war materials. Unfortunately, however, the Division that took over

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this sector from us when the New Zealand Division left for the Somme seemed to lack initiative and did not straafe the Hun as much as we had done, and the consequence was that when our Division returned from the Somme it found the Sailly sector, adjoining its old sector, very quiet, compared to Armentieres; and the Hun had actually the cheek to build cookhouses in very conspicuous positions right under the eyes of the troops in our trenches. Once more our mortars got to work and the old Hun soon found this sector a very uncomfortable one, and cookhouses and other abodes of luxury quickly vanished in the air.

The battalion commanders were very good to the Stokes battery commanders in supplying the latter with large carrying parties for carrying up ammunition, especially when the mortars were going to collaborate with the infantry in raids on the enemy lines. This we often did. These carrying parties had to be drawn from the Infantry, as the personnel

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of a battery—viz., sixty-five—was so small that it was impossible to work the guns efficiently and also carry up thousands of rounds of ammunition. For instance, on some occasions we pumped a few hundred shells "rapid" into the enemy front line, and then over went the raiding party, while our mortars lifted their barrage and concentrated on the communication trenches and support line of the enemy while our men were doing their work in the Hun front line.

In connection with the formation of New Zealand Stokes Batteries the name of Captain F. Morgan, M.C., who afterwards died of wounds, must be mentioned. He was an officer of a very fine type, of untiring energy, and always looking for a stunt to show what the mortars could do; he loved them, and nearly every moment of his spare time was occupied in trying to bring the working of these weapons to a stage nearer perfection.

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EQUIPMENT WITH THE MORTARS

In the Battle of the Somme our batteries did excellent work destroying enemy strong points and machine-gun positions which held up the advance, and in many cases it was only necessary to fire very few shells, so accurate were our gunners and so deadly was the effect of their fire.

Co-operation of all arms was everything on the Somme, as well as everywhere else, and on one occasion, through bombers who were in advance signalling to the mortars at a critical time, two machine guns of the enemy were silenced, a party of Germans holding some shell craters behind their front line were forced to surrender, and a half-mined village was cleared of the enemy. A few shells judiciously placed allowed the bombers to creep within a few yards of the German barricade and effectively bomb them out. There are many similar instances of the sterling work of the Stokes in this battle.

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EQUIPMENT WITH THE MORTARS

On the 25th September, 1916, on the Somme, during the attack of the New Zealanders, the Stokes Mortars put up one of the finest shows during the whole war. The opinion of the War Office was that this co-operation of the Stokes with the Infantry and machine guns was a classic example of the ideal co-operation between these three branches of the Service.

The attack was launched from a trench in front of a Flers village called Grove Alley, and was directed against Factory Ridge. Over 3000 New Zealanders took part in this attack, and, owing to the thorough mopping up prior to the advance, of all enemy strong points and machine-gun positions, there were only three casualties sustained by our men during the attack. Two very strong enemy positions were discovered by our aeroplanes just before we went forward, one in No Man's Land in front of Grove Alley on the right of our position and one at the Sugar Factory on Factory

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Ridge. Against the strong point in front of Grove Alley was directed the fire of two Stokes Mortars at a range of 250 yards. Forty-four German dead were counted in this strong point when it was captured by us. Forty other Germans were captured here, besides the enemy brigadier-general and his staff, six enemy machine guns, and 200,000 rounds of ammunition. The German General, when this strong point was taken, said that if it had not been for the concentrated fire of our trench mortars on his position, this strong point, with its six machine guns, would have annihilated our Infantry in its advance, as 200 Germans had been specially picked for the job of defending it. Before our trench mortar fire had finished its devastating effect on the strong point in front of Grove Alley numbers of the enemy commenced to jump out of the strong point and run back towards Eaucourt L' Abbaye, and they would have made good their escape at once beyond the range of the

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stokes Mortars at that time had their action not been seen by Sergeant George Hulme, of the First Auckland Battalion, who put his Lewis gun over the parapet and rushed forward to a point where he was able to sweep the whole of the ground over which the Huns were retreating. He was under heavy fire from two enemy Maxims during the forward move, but he kept his fire directed on the fleeing Germans and did great execution among them. For this act of gallantry he was recommended for the D.C.M., but, like many another deserving case, his was one of those of which nothing further was heard from the seat whence the gods give out their favours.

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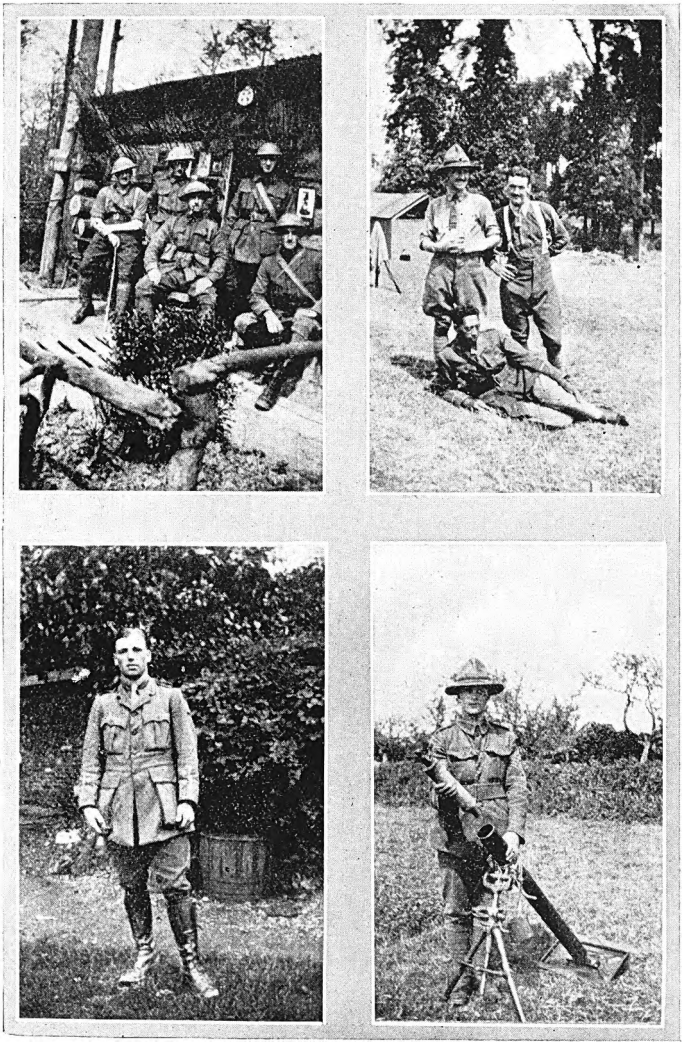

(1) A Log Cabin. (2) Off Duty, Ploegsteert Wood.
(3) Captain Robinson, Commanding 3rd L.T.M.B.
(4) Loading and Firing the Mortar.

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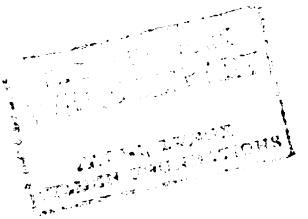

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CHAPTER IV

VARIOUS ACTIONS

The Division moved into the Levante-Flerbaix sector about 10th October and immediately set about to re-establish British prestige in that sector. All three batteries were active, night and day firing being kept up, each gun endeavouring to fire 100 rounds a day. This was a big task, the ground being so soft that it was difficult to find a sound place in which to rest a base plate, and even the putting down of concrete blocks afforded little help. The Saxons who were opposite retaliated vigorously with trench mortars and artillery, but the work of demolishing the opposing lines went on steadily. Tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition were used, and the casualty lists mounted upward. There were days at this time when the only activity recorded in the British press consisted of the words: "The

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day was marked by great trench-mortar activity south of Armentieres." At the end of three weeks the German front line was practically flattened out and reconnaissance parties penetrated at night freely and unopposed into the enemy lines.

The second Auckland raid on 21st February, 1917, in which over 500 men, under command of Major A. C. Mackenzie, was a most successful show, and one in which the Stokes played a very prominent part. The raiders assaulted the front and support line of the enemy—two companies the front line and two companies the support. There was a tremendous amount of artillery and trench-mortar support to this raid, there being over sixty eighteen-pounders, twenty 4.5 Howitzers, four sixty-pounders, and four 6-inch Howitzers, one heavy and three batteries of medium trench mortars, besides sixteen light trench mortars.

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At zero (5.45 a.m.) the trench mortar shells literally poured out in showers on to either flank of the enemy position which was being assaulted, and the trenches being thickly held by the Huns this tornado of shells wrought great havoc among them. The wire defences had been well cut by the trench mortars, and our raiders were in the German front trenches before the Hun barrage, in response to his S.O.S., fell on our front line. There was some very stubborn fighting before the raiders reached the support line, and the enemy fought furiously to drive our men back, but our men remained over half an hour in the Hun trenches, destroying machine guns, war materials and dug-outs, and then returned to our own trenches. Of the Infantry, one officer and 17 men were killed and six officers and 70 men were wounded, but as a set-off our men killed about 200 of the enemy and one officer and 43 of the enemy were captured. The raid was a great success, and 2nd Auck-

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land was congratulated by the Commander-in-Chief. During the raid the light trench mortars fired 3000 rounds and the batteries worked very hard. Two guns exploded, and all the guns were worked from emplacements exposed to heavy shell fire. However, the men of these batteries worked with great determination and grit, and deserved high praise for their work.

The astounding effect that this weapon had on the morale of the Hun was demonstrated more clearly each time we went into action, for he now knew that the British had a mobile and very deadly weapon far superior in all respects to any that he possessed himself.

After the Battle of the Somme a number of officers and N.C.O.'s were sent to England for the purpose of stiffening up the new 4th New Zealand Brigade which was being formed in England, and which consisted of surplus reinforcements and men from English depots.

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Captain W. H. S. Widdowson, M.C., Commanding
4th L.T.M.B.

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A complete brigade was formed, including a Light Trench Mortar Battery under the command of Captain W. H. S. Widdowson, M.C. This battery was composed of several N.C.O.'s and men from the 1st and 2nd Light Trench Mortar Batteries who had been wounded, and the remainder were drawn from the new battalions of the 4th Brigade when they commenced their training at Codford. This battery did exceptionally good work in the trench warfare just previous to the Battle of Messines, and also later during the period the 4th Brigade was holding the line in the Le Biset sector, when it co-operated with the battalions in the line when they moved forward into the Hun front and support lines, the enemy falling back across the River Lys, owing to their position having become untenable as a result of the Messines Battle.

The utter hopelessness of troops standing up against a concentrated fire from the Stokes was shown later at the Battle of Messines,

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where the following incident in the attack bears out the effect on the Hun morale which I have above described:—

Before the Battle of Messines we (4th Battery) were sent up to Le Biset for billets on the 8th May, taking over from an Australian Battery. Many will remember that at this particular time it was infinitely worse in this village for shell fire than being in the front line. Part of our battery was in the Villa de Roses, which was not what it sounded, as it was not long before they were shelled out of it, but luckily without any casualties. The reason for the concentrated fire on this village was the searching by the Hun batteries for a number of Australian batteries of 4.5 Howitzers and English 6in. Howitzers that were dug in behind the village and were annoying him with continuous and heavy harrassing fire. In consequence of this, Le Biset came in for the biggest shelling it had all through the war, and was almost totally destroyed, and yet, in spite of

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this, a few brave French families had remained until they were ordered away by the military authorities.

It was pitiful to see this once prosperous and picturesque village, like hundreds of others, battered to pieces by the Hun's shelling.

Our second billet in this village was worse than the first, as no sooner had we moved to it than old Fritz put a solid "straafe" of five point nines on us and followed it up with a gas-shelling at night, which gas shells were very hard to detect, as they burst at the same time as the high-explosive shells.

It was some considerable time before the gas guard realised that the shells were gas shells and gave the alarm, and from then on a most uncomfortable few hours were spent in gas masks.

The following morning (29th) part of our battery moved up to the line in front of Le Biset to cover the front of a composite brigade that was holding the line, and just before

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moving off, by way of a send-off from the village, Fritz put over a number of well-placed shells into the road outside our billet, where the battery was assembling, badly wounding Sergeant Mitchell, a very fine n.c.o. whom we could ill spare, and also 2nd-Lieutenant Powell slightly wounded in the head, which necessitated his evacuation.

This battery had a pretty rough time during its first tour of duty in the line as a new unit. Le Biset sector, which had been very quiet hitherto, was now becoming a pretty hot place to be in, for all the batteries of artillery preparing for the Messines Battle were moving up behind the line and beginning their registration work.

The writer had a very exciting experience in one of the buildings at the Le Toquet railway station, which had been battered about considerably from Hun shell-fire, but had been left alone for some time. I thought this would make a good central position for a head-

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quarters, being handy to both the right and left sector, and situated on a trench well known as Long Avenue. About 3 p.m. one afternoon soon after going into the line, the Hun suddenly took a violent dislike to this isolated brick building and started to see if he could level it to the ground. Sergeant Gibbons and myself had just come back from the guns after a long morning around the sector, and were sitting down having something to eat, about 3 p.m., when a tremendous "straafe" began. Luckily, inside this particular building we had built a small sand-bagged position, which, although it stopped us being knocked out by flying bricks, was not sufficiently strong to hold the big pressure of *debris* that came down when the roof and the walls were blown in on top of us. Shells seemed to be bursting all around the building, with no hope of escape, and suddenly we fully expected to be blown upwards and to pieces, as two shells landed in the cellar underneath us, which was filled with water,

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but, wonderful to relate, they were "duds." In a little over an hour this building had been practically demolished over our heads, and we were just going to make a dash for the trench when suddenly, just as quickly as it had begun, the shelling stopped. We were not at all sorry, and breathed a big sigh of relief, after a most uncomfortable time.

At the head of Long Avenue, where our front line was, the Hun front line was only about forty yards away from ours, and the consequence was that our patrols were often coming into contact with Hun patrols in "No Man's Land." This resulted in a lot of bomb-throwing and trench-mortar work, as the companies holding the line—the Loyal North Lancs.—would put up the S.O.S. immediately the clash between the patrols took place. The net result was that the Hun's front and support line got a very good pounding from the Artillery and Trench Mortars, which soon had its effect in quieting the sector.

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Group of Members of 4th L.T.M.B.

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During the last ten days before Messines a veritable hell of heavy fire from the enemy was evoked through the practice barrages that our artillery and trench mortars commenced at 3 p.m. daily for about half an hour. The reply from the Hun was generally directed with all its fury in and around Ploegsteert Wood, and we suffered a fair number of casualties in consequence. The Catacombs and a number of other places where there was a great number of men were not exactly health resorts, especially at night, when they came in for a particularly heavy gas-shelling by the enemy. This was a great discomfort, as it meant night after night for about a week being for hours at a time in our gas masks. One got used to it after a bit, and some men could eventually sleep in theirs, they had got so accustomed to wearing them.

Then day after day the shelling from behind our lines directed on to the Messines

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Ridge became heavier and heavier, and one noticed going up to the line that numbers of new batteries were being moved up every day ready for the Great Day which was to come.

Most of the batteries only fired for registration purposes on to known enemy positions and then kept quiet until the morning of the 7th June, which was, as the Tommies put it, to be "Bert's bank 'olliday," "Bert" being General Plumer, the little General of the 2nd Army, who did such great work all through the War.

At last the long-looked-for day came, and our assaulting battalions moved up to the line from billets, thoroughly trained and in the pink of condition, and as they passed out towards the line the villagers wished them God-speed in their favourite words—"Bon chance, messieurs, bon chance."

The gods were good to us, and the day dawned in perfect weather. The whole of the previous night had been calm, and after a

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short sleep (those that could sleep) everyone was ready long before the appointed time, waiting for the fateful zero hour, which was 4.10 a.m. The tension was great—only a few minutes were left—still all was quiet—now in a moment—it was coming—a terrific roar, and, like a tremendous earthquake, the earth shook beneath us and simultaneously our huge mines—the product of Titanic labour—vomited forth the whole of their deadly force into the air. This was the signal! Had Hell been let loose? Over five thousand pieces of artillery thundered, and the creeping fire of their barrage went forward before our troops and took its deadly toll of the shaken enemy.

At first it seemed as if the Bosche had undermined our positions and set off mines of his own making, but we knew better. The enemy were paralysed. The mines had such an awful effect on their ranks that those who were not killed were speechless and stupefied

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and outwardly shaking at the knees as they were captured and brought back as prisoners by our men.

Not long afterwards, not more than an hour and a-half from zero hour, we were breakfasting on the much-coveted ridge, for the capture of which we had been preparing for nearly two years.

During the attack, part of our New Zealand First Brigade was held up by a German strong point in a farm. It was a very strong position, and was held by eight machine guns and about 200 German infantry. One battalion, having suffered a number of casualties, saw that immediate action was necessary on the part of the Artillery, but it was impossible to get speedy communication with them. Two Stokes Mortars were advancing about 150 yards in the rear of this battalion, and the officer in charge of them, Lieutenant Nicol, immediately grasped the situation and brought his guns into action, firing seven rounds

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Captain W. E. L. Napier, M.C. (The Author)

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"rapid" into the farm with telling effect, the result being that our advance was immediately resumed, a number of the enemy killed, and the remainder of the Huns in the farm threw away their arms and surrendered *en masse* to our oncoming troops.

Again, a short time afterwards at La Basseville, after very hard fighting, our 1st Brigade captured the village, but as, owing to heavy casualties, we had only a handful of men to hold the village, the Bosches' counter-attack drove us out. With the assistance, however, of the Stokes Mortars, which wrought great havoc among the Germans, we succeeded in again occupying the village by a very successful attack three days later.

The confidence of our Infantry was rapidly gained by these exploits of the Stokes Batteries, and in the trench warfare that followed before the Division went out of the line to train for the Passchendaele offensive, battalion commanders frequently sent for the officer in

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charge of the Stokes Mortars in the line for the purpose of getting him to bring his guns to bear on enemy machine guns that harassed working parties or became very offensive. In practically all cases in a very short space of time after the orders were given these enemy machine guns were either blown out or silenced, and our Infantry's trouble was temporarily over.

In many cases these sharp bursts of fire on the Hun positions brought retaliation on to our front line, but it was nearly always arranged that a battery of artillery was standing by, and any sign of temper on the part of the Hun in this manner was repaid to him with good interest. The result in the long run was that the Hun found it paid him better to keep quiet.

In cases where our line was thickly held by troops the officer in charge of the mortars always endeavoured to carry out his offensive operations from disused trenches or shell

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holes, in order that retaliation would not come back on our Infantry.

At this particular time the Bosche was giving us a severe dose of mustard gas shelling every night on to our front, support, and reserve lines, and a great number of men were evacuated through this cause. The writer and several men of the 4th Battery were rather badly gassed, and numbers of men from nearly every unit of ours in the line were being evacuated daily, which was getting a serious thing for the Division.

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CHAPTER V

THE WEAPON OF OPPORTUNITY

When our Division moved from the Lys sector to the Lumbres area for training, the Infantry had so much confidence in the Stokes that it was arranged that generally in all battalion and brigade practice attacks the mortars worked in conjunction with the Infantry. The mortars usually advanced with the second wave of the attack and fired empty shells into strong points holding the advance. These were generally marked in practice by fatigue men hidden in hedges representing machine guns, and when the Infantry got within 50 or 60 yards of them they appeared waving flags.

This co-operation of the Infantry and Trench Mortars in practice was very successful and was commented on very highly by the Corps Commander, General Godley, when he

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(1) Regent Street, Ploegsteert Wood. (2) Ploegsteert Village. (3) Three of 1st Battery with Hun headgear after the Somme.

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witnessed the 4th Brigade's last practice attack at Le Wast prior to our departure for Ypres and to take part in the Passchendaele Battle.

It will be seen from the foregoing pages that this weapon is one of opportunity. To succeed meant that a great deal of initiative and responsibility rested on the gun crews and the officers in charge. This put the personnel of the batteries on their mettle, as the crews, being always picked men, were proud of their responsibility and became highly trustworthy and efficient.

The great pity was that the work, although very exciting, was dangerous work, and the casualties were in consequence pretty high, and it meant training new men for the job all the time; but the adaptability of our Digger was such that it was surprising how quickly new personnel became efficient.

We lamented the loss of many a brave pal after a stunt, and when our casualties were heavy we often wondered when we went out

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of the line to reorganise if we should ever get to the same state of efficiency again. The initiative and resource of our men, however, was such that it was never long before our batteries were up to concert pitch once more.

During our two months of trench warfare following the battle of Messines we experimented with the Stokes for anti-aircraft defence, and found it most successful. In this branch we—(at that time I was in the 4th Light Trench Mortar Battalion)—were the first battery to try this exciting means of stopping Hun aircraft from flying over our trenches.

I remember the first day we tried the Stokes out in its new capacity, how excited we all were at the possibility of bringing down an enemy 'plane. We set up three guns at intervals of about 150 yards along the front: one gun with fuses cut to burst at three seconds, another at four seconds, and another at five seconds; and patiently awaited

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developments. It was not long before our patience was rewarded, and a big enemy plane crossed our line at a height of about 500 feet. The nearest gun opened on him with two fine bursts just above him, while simultaneously the second gun put two equally good bursts underneath. The Infantry were very interested and excited at the thought of the possibility of bringing down a 'plane, and the machine seemed to falter and fall and then right itself and made off back to the enemy lines. Other enemy planes came over that day to investigate this new method of ours in anti-aircraft defence, but were very wary, and kept at a height where our mortars could not reach them.

In effect, the result obtained was this: that our lines were very seldom crossed by low-flying enemy 'planes in this sector.

A few nights later our Battery was relieved from the line, and we in the Trench Mortars

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were billetted at that time in Nieppe, near the Square. About 11 p.m. a number of Gothas came over on a bombing raid and hovered over the town. Our senior sergeant, who was always on for any stunt where the mortars were concerned, dashed up to my room and asked permission to have a "go" at the intruders, which permission was readily given. In a minute or two we had two guns out and were blazing away in great style at four of the enemy 'planes, which soon rose to a great height and left the village; and they deposited their loads of "eggs," as we called their bombs, a few minutes later in our Artillery horse lines at Croix du Bac, killing about 80 horses, and made off for home.

The sequel to this night firing at the 'planes from Nieppe was a curt "chit" from Brigade Headquarters the following morning prohibiting firing from towns at enemy aircraft. The reason for this we found out

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afterwards was that a number of pieces of shell had dropped on our Brigadier's chateau, which, of course, we were very sorry for, but fortunately nobody was injured.

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CHAPTER VI

ESTABLISHMENT OF ARMY SCHOOLS

With the establishment of corps and army schools of instruction in musketry, machine guns, and bombing came also the establishment of a trench mortar wing in these schools.

The Second Army established a particularly good school at Turdeghem, near Hazebrouck, which had very good instructors, who kept in touch with the Division in the line and got the latest important information and lessons that had been learned in each particular stunt, by conferences with the battery commanders of the different divisions after important battles. This kept the training of the men always up to date.

Our Division had an allotment every month of officers and N.C.O.'s at this school, both for bombing and trench mortar work, and a great deal of benefit was derived from the training, as much of the firing was with

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live ammunition, and practice was carried on in conjunction with Infantry and especially with bombers in attack.

An examination was held at the end of every course, which lasted a fortnight, and in nearly every case the New Zealanders passed either V.G. (very good) or G. (good) and Q.I. (qualified as instructors). After this examination at the end of the course competitions in speed in setting up the mortar, and also in coming into action and firing on dummy trenches, were held, and almost without exception these competitions were easily won by our men, of which we were very proud, as at the Army School there were the men of a number of other British divisions to compete with.

Besides this Second Army School, we had a Corps School at Morbecque, and the officer in charge of the Trench Mortar Wing there was one of our own officers, Captain Sievright, of the Wellington Regiment. He worked

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particularly hard in this branch, and many of our N.C.O.'s and men passed through his hands and came back to us much benefited by his instruction.

Owing to the simplicity of the trench mortar, which often makes one marvel that it was not invented before, and the short time in which a gunner can be trained to its use, compared with an artillery gunner, and also from an economical point of view, the Stokes stands alone. When one realises that an 18-pounder field gun costs about £500 and a Stokes about £10, and where the shell of an 18-pounder costs about £2 and the shell of a Stokes 7/6, and when communication was so easy by the Stokes with the Infantry, it can readily be seen that once the trench mortar was firmly established in France it relieved the Artillery of a vast amount of trench firing and enabled that arm to do more counter battery work, and effected a huge saving of money at the same time.

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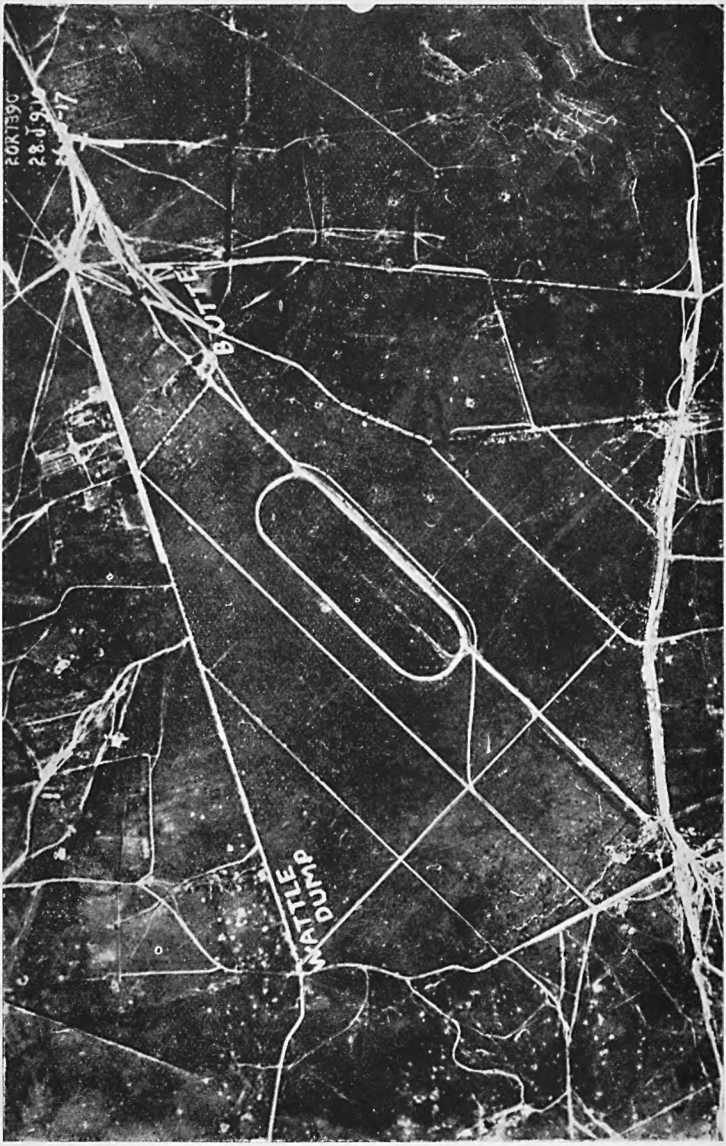

Polygon Wood Racecourse and the Butte, before British Advance.

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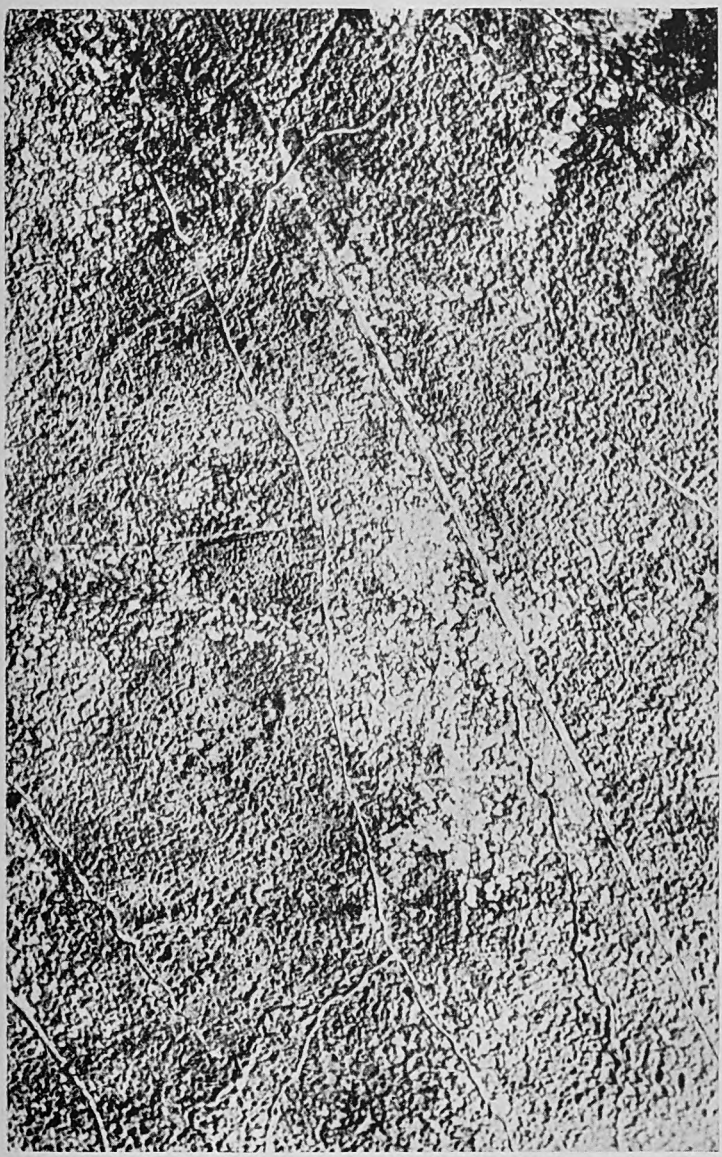

Same piece of country after Australian and New Zealand advance. (Note shell-holes, denoting terriffic bombardment this place underwent.)

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CHAPTER VII

YPRES AND THE BATTLE OF GRAVENSTAFEL.

After just over three weeks of training in delightful Picardy, where the Division was billetted in villages within a radius of about 16 kilometres from Boulogne, all our batteries were anxious once again to show what the Stokes could do, and we moved up to positions handy to our jumping-off place, two nights before the battle.

It had been found by experience that the greatest number of shells that could be carried in the advance was six. The conditions, however, in the battle for the Gravenstafel Ridge were abnormal, owing to the long carry over very boggy ground, which was a mass of shell-holes. The shell carriers of some batteries were men lent from the Infantry, and carried

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some six shells and some four, but it was found that those batteries whose carriers carried four shells were the most successful, as 45 pounds of dead weight, besides a man's equipment and rifle, was as much as any man could be expected to carry under such trying circumstances.

During the Battle for the Gravenstafel Ridge on 4th October the 1st and 4th Batteries went over with the 1st and 4th Brigades, two guns in support of each battalion respectively, but owing to the extremely long carry for ammunition, and heavy casualties, after firing several times during the advance the guns were withdrawn after the objectives were taken, as there were no men to spare in reserve for keeping the guns supplied with ammunition.

Although the conditions were exceptionally bad for the Stokes, the 1st Battery's guns were able to render good service to the Infantry. Two guns under Lieutenant Oxen-

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ham went over with the 1st Wellington Battalion and two guns under Lieut. R. K. Nicol, M.C., with 1st Battalion Auckland Regiment advancing at zero behind the first wave of the attack, one gun on each company front. On the capture of the Red Line these guns advanced again with the leap-frogging battalions to the final objective, the Blue Line, the remaining two sections being held in brigade reserve. Each battalion provided shell-carrying parties of two N.C.O.'s and 16 men. The four guns were placed in position, one each with Taranaki and West Coast Companies of the 1st Wellington Infantry Battalion and one each with the 6th and 15th Companies of the 1st Auckland Infantry Battalion.

Lieut. Nicol, with the Right Battalion, was wounded and had one gun crew knocked out soon after zero. The other gun, under Corpl. W. Brierly, carried on over the whole battalion front and came into action on several occasions. As the Infantry were digging in

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on the Red Line, that non-commissioned officer silenced a machine gun firing on our troops, and as soon as the barrage lifted (30 minutes after the capture of the Red Line) he worked over to within 150 yards of Albatross Farm and joined the Taranaki Company, working forward with them to ahead of Kronprinz Farm, where he dug his gun in behind the Blue Line (final objective), covering the left flank in the direction of Alder Farm. Lieut. Oxenham, with the right battalion's two guns, worked forward to the Red Line without any trouble, and on leaving there, after the barrage had lifted, Corpl. Robinson, with the right gun, came into action against an enemy machine gun in a dug-out. He then worked forward to get observation of an enemy machine gun which was firing short bursts on to the right battalion advancing, and picked up its position, and after a few well-placed shots the enemy put up the white flag. At this point Lieut. Oxenham, who had

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been busy against snipers and machine guns in shellholes, came over and got Corporal Robinson to open fire against a position that was holding up the other gun. The enemy machine gun had killed Corporal Jeffries and two men, but its crew surrendered on Corporal Robinson's gun coming into action against it. Just past the final objective a machine gun was observed firing from a position. Our right gun fired five rounds, and the Huns put up the white flag and began to retire back over the ridge, but a few well-placed shots behind them turned them about, and they came in and surrendered. The total casualties of this battery were: Killed, four men; died of wounds, three men; wounded, one officer and three other ranks; missing, one.

At 6 p.m. the guns were ordered to be withdrawn, and this battery had finished its good work for this attack and came back to Spree Farm to its headquarters. Two days later it was relieved by the 147th Brigade

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Light Trench Mortar Battery and went back to bivouac at Goldfish Chateau, just behind Ypres, and the day after left for New Camp, near Poperinghe, for a few days' rest.

Four guns of the 4th Battery also went over with the attack on the 4th Brigade front. Two mortars, under command of the author, advanced to the first objective with the 3rd Auckland Battalion on the right of the New Zealand advance. Great difficulty was experienced carrying the mortars and ammunition across the swampy ground, which in some places was almost impassable, and very few of the shell-carriers reached the final objectives with their heavy loads over such awful country; consequently these two mortars only came into action twice. After reaching the final objective it was found that nearly all the shell-carriers were either wounded or missing, but one of the mortars was dug-in and fired on S.O.S. at 6 p.m. The other two guns, under 2nd-Lieut. Marsden, advanced with the

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3rd Wellington Battalion, but, unfortunately, soon after reaching our objectives this officer was killed, and what was left of his gun teams carried on until the order for withdrawal of the mortars was given.

The attack on the 12th October was much worse as regards mud, and it was practically impossible for the 2nd and 3rd Batteries to come into action.

During the long winter months of trench warfare in "The Salient," which Ypres was called, the trench mortars were very active. There were plenty of targets in the shape of enemy machine-gun positions. The following extract from a 1st Brigade intelligence report for a period of 24 hours from 6 a.m. 31st January, 1918, to 6 a.m. 1st February, 1918, gives an indication of the kind of daily work of the mortars in this sector:—

"During the night our Stokes Mortars were very active against machine-gun positions in Joiners' Avenue (name of trench), J.6.C.

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(map reference), Judge X roads, and Cemetery J.11b; 10 rounds were also fired at Pill-box J17a, 70.65, when excited cries were heard."

The 1st February happened to be my birthday, and to celebrate the occasion we gave the Hun a little bigger dose than usual, with good results, for we sent a patrol out afterwards and found a long piece of trench destroyed, a machine gun out of action, and eleven dead.

The Battle of Gravenstafel will ever be remembered by those who took part in it. The long wait behind the assembly tapes (the ground had been marked by tapes where we were to kick-off from, as there was no front line) was terrible. Many of us were within a short distance of the assembly line at 11 p.m., and the night of waiting, wondering what the dawn of the morrow would bring forth, was a long way worse than being in the attack itself. Towards dawn the Hun began

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an intense fire almost directly on our points of assembly, and a number of men were hit before the attack actually began. Once the attack began, at 6 a.m., and the wonderful barrage crept forward before our troops, raining death on all before it, we felt wonderfully secure. To hear our own guns barking loudly behind us and pouring their deadly missiles on to targets before us, the effect of which could be seen, was a wonderful tonic to our men.

The attack, as far as we could see from the right of the New Zealand advance, went forward as if the men were actually on parade, and the Blue Line (first objective) was taken and consolidated and a continuous front line connected up in the shortest space of time. A pause of half an hour was made here before the barrage went forward again.

The mortars so far had not been able to do very much during the advance to the second objective (Black Line).

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Everyone remembers the relief to all ranks the news was that we were going to be relieved after Passchendaele, and towards the end of October three weeks' spell actually came our way.

Everyone was done up, and after getting out of the line on a cold October night we were bivouacked for the night in shell holes near Goldfish Chateau, behind Ypres. The following morning we marched early to the entraining point near Ypres, and after a short railway journey marched for the rest of the day and until late in the evening, until we finally arrived at the little village of Rebercques, which was our destination. Foot-worn and sore, the Battery quickly got their billets ship-shape, and after a fine meal which the cooks, who had been sent on ahead, had prepared we all forgot the war for some time to come. What a great welcome we had at this village, and, although late at night, the people were very kind. The Mayor, a stately

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old gentleman with snow-white hair, welcomed us to his home and gave us of the best he could provide, both in food and accommodation, and Madame, his wife, produced a feed of omelettes, coffee, and wine which those who partook of will never forget. This was our first real meal for weeks. We could hardly realise that we were back again in civilisation, and the sight of a bed was almost too good to be true, and several of us made attempts to sleep in them, but ended in curling up on the floor in a rug. We slept very comfortably, strangely enough, because we were not used to beds, as none had been in one for months.

The following day we awoke, not until the afternoon, but were refreshed and felt almost ready for the fray once more. It was astonishing how rest and food restored the vigour and spirit of the troops, almost like magic. How quickly one got over fatigue and exhaustion. Twenty-four hours before this

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the Battery was so done up that everyone thought it would take us weeks before we felt fit again, and here everyone was playing football and very happy—*c'est la guèrre.*

The day following we commenced training again to get up to scratch before going back to Ypres for three weary months of trench warfare in the middle of winter.

Before we went back to the line a number of us had the opportunity of having leave to England, which was greatly appreciated, and after ten short days back we were in the line with our units once more.

This was 12th of November. How absurd! Yesterday I had breakfast at my London hotel, got a motor lorry going towards Ypres at Boulogne, after landing from the leave boat, and was in the line at night—less than twelve hours from the heart of London to the front-line trenches! How wonderful it all was, for it was this nearness to England that brought it home to one how much the

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winning of the war meant to us, and how close we had been to losing the Channel ports in France.

On the 3rd December, 1917, an attack was made on Polderhock Chateau, a famous landmark and a very hard nut to crack, which was on the right of the line we were then holding.

The Trench Mortars, 3rd Battery, and 4th Battery were allotted the task of thickening up the barrage, each battery firing several hundred rounds. The Infantry reached their objectives in some cases, but the casualties being very heavy they were not strong enough to hold their position, and eventually had to fall back on our original line.

After the Christmas of 1917 the salient was very quiet for a time, but one night will stand out in everyone's memory that saw it, and that was the wonderful bombardment of the enemy's line and back areas from the Salient to far north of Houlthurst Forest (a

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front of about 30 miles) on the night of the 31st December-1st January. This bombardbardment was a New Year's gift to the Hun. On the tick of midnight every piece of artillery, trench mortar, and machine gun belched forth its New Year message. The whole salient was alight from the gun flashes, and it looked for all the world as if from an enormous dress circle of a theatre thousands of guns were firing as fast as they could on to a stage, and at no other time did one get the outline of this tremendous Ypres salient so vividly flashed before his eyes. What a sight it was! The Hun putting up his many coloured S.O.S. and other lights made the scene for the few minutes that it lasted a grand one. The whole of the snow-covered country seemed to be galvanised into an inferno for a time, and then almost a death-like silence followed. Everyone expected the Hun to reply with a very heavy fire on our lines, but not a shot came back, and dawn broke on a desolate,

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snow-clad land that looked as if it had been forsaken by man; yet still, thousands of men were there hidden from the eye of the enemy, waiting and wondering what this New Year—1918—would bring forth for the Allies, for England, and for them.

The Americans had certainly come into the War at this epoch, but what they had done and were doing at this particular time to advance the general cause was not apparent to those who were holding the line. They adopted the Stokes Mortar, and a number of our N.C.O.'s and an officer were sent over from France to America, to one of the big Home depots, to establish a school of instruction in the use of this weapon. The "Doughboys" were quick to pick up the way of handling the Stokes Mortar, but as it was purely and simply a weapon of opportunity in the attack, and our American cousins had not had much experience in attack, many grand opportunities of displaying its usefulness were lost.

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I remember once, just before leaving the "Abode of Hate," as some called the vicinity of Ypres, I was urgently sent for by Captain Vercoe, of the 16th Waikatos, to bring up a couple of mortars and enough shells to knock out a machine gun and some snipers in a trench in the Reutel Cemetery that had caused a considerable number of casualties and much annoyance to that company's working parties. We got a couple of mortars and a number of rounds of ammunition up to the most convenient place to straafe from, "tout de suite," and we informed Brigade Headquarters, per telephone, of our intention to fire. At this particular time there was a rule, which used to be carried a bit too far sometimes, that no offensive action was to be taken without informing Brigade. However, our opportunity of demolishing a good target and saving many lives would have been lost if we had not acted promptly, as dusk was fast approaching; so we took the risk and opened fire, and

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in a very short time the enemy machine gun and most of his trench in the vicinity was "napoo." Both Captain Vercoe and myself were hauled over the coals for this, as we had contravened some signalling orders by using the telephone to inform Brigade of the "shoot," but, instead of a good straafe from the brigadier, as we expected, he turned the supposed censure into some rather eulogistic remarks concerning the Stokes and the effective work we had done. One had to take these chances sometimes, and not keep strictly to the letter of the law in a branch of the Service like ours; otherwise many grand opportunities would have been lost of punishing the Bosche, and both in the Artillery as well as the Mortars our motto was *not* "Don't straafe the Hun and he won't straafe you," as in some sectors was said to be the case, but "Never miss a chance."

Before leaving Ypres the Stokes was used on many occasions in its new capacity against

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enemy aircraft, and many of those who were in the line at Ypres will remember some very exciting moments when one of the German flight commanders of Baron Richthoven's famous circus used to come over the line flying very low and, to a certain extent, "putting the wind up" the Infantry with his machine gun. On these occasions the men of the detachment whose guns were set up for anti-aircraft firing were very keen to bring down the Bosche "king pin," as they called him, and on one occasion the fire of two of our guns with shells bursting above and below him injured his 'plane and brought him almost to the ground, but he managed to right himself in time to make off home. This fellow did not make his appearance on the sector again for a number of days, and so we concluded that we had done his 'plane a considerable amount of damage.

These experiences were very exciting, and kept the men on the alert during the short

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period of daylight that we had during those long winter months.

During the turn of each battery in the line in the Ypres Salient, which usually was week in, week out, about a thousand rounds used to be fired on to enemy machine-gun and trench mortar positions located by the companies in the line and verified by the intelligence reports of the battalions. In this way very often a great deal of enemy harassing machine-gun and trench-mortar fire was kept down, and prevented from disorganising our Infantry, and our mortars continually blew out their positions as soon as they were discovered. However, the "carry" of ammunition over rough country from "Wattle Dump" near Westhoek Ridge to the front line, a distance of about two miles by the Duckwalk Track, was very hard on the men, and it was not until after Christmas that our ammunition was brought right up to "The Crucifix Dump" near the "Butte de Polygon" by a light rail-

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way. This was a great convenience to us, as it meant we could then do more firing, as the "carry" to the front line from the dump was a comparatively short one after the long two miles mentioned above.

At this time the "Yukon Pack" had been issued to the batteries, and we found that a man could carry more than double the load of shells on one of these packs than he could carry ordinarily by any other means. This meant that a man could carry from twelve to fifteen shells weighing approximately 10¾ pounds each for a fairly long distance. This, as can readily be seen, effected a great saving in time and labour. The carriers using the "pack" had long sticks to balance themselves with, and when a large party were going up the line strung out in single file they looked like a party of gold-hunters hitting the trail for the Yukon. This pack was a splendid invention, and might well be adopted by the farmers in the back blocks of New Zealand for carry-

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ing moderate weights over country where horses cannot be employed.

Gun positions were very important, but in the salient, owing to the very swampy ground and the consequent bad drainage conditions, our emplacements were not of the best, and as the whole country for many miles around was simply a mass of shell-holes it was difficult for us to make emplacements where the guns would not sink into the ground when they were fired. The French and the Germans had engineers attached to all their trench mortar batteries, and were therefore able to construct very solid emplacements, but the British were not so fortunate in this respect. Our men generally had only time to keep out of the rain. When one speaks of gun "positions," what is meant is the defensive positions or "battle emplacements," and these were never used for offensive purposes, but only for repelling enemy attacks or trench raids. These positions were usually about

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two hundred yards behind the front line, and as far away from a communication trench as convenient, and not near any points plainly marked on maps. The reason for this was that the enemy usually shelled communication trenches and any prominent land marks. On special occasions, however, the battle emplacements were used when the Hun became offensive with his trench mortars at night and worried the Infantry. On these occasions a screen of sandbags was erected in front of the gun pits to hide the flash of the gun, and fire was opened on his communication trenches and his support line. A slow barrage of a round every minute or so generally silenced him.

Each gun, as a rule, had from three to five different emplacements, the idea being to shoot a few rounds from one position and then move the gun rapidly to another, averaging about twenty rounds per position, and this method became almost universal, as it made

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Captain A. B. Sievwright, 1st L.T.M. Battery.

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it almost impossible for the Hun to find out our real gun positions. In some cases the enemy was known to shell an alternative gun position for weeks after it had been fired from by us and vacated. We did our best to encourage him to waste his ammunition in this way,

The co-operation between the Infantry and the light mortars in the line was greatly developed by the trench warfare during the winter months at Ypres.

By the end of February, 1918, the New Zealand Division had had a surfeit of holding the line in the salient, and old hands were beginning to say that the first five and the last three years of the War were the worst! However, our men took it all cheerfully, saying, philosophically, "C'est la guerre." Our relief when at last it did come was very welcome.

After practically four months of continuous duty in the Ypres Salient, when we came out of the line it took some time to smarten-up the different units of the Division once more,

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and we must have looked a pretty rough lot when we went back to the area in the neighbourhood of Cassell and Staple to rest and to train. How useful that training was, and how needful that rest, was proved when we got the sudden call, in March, to go south to the Somme in order to stop the oncoming Hun, who almost in a flash had broken the Allied line in a weak spot and was rushing forward with his hordes and re-occupying in a day as much country as it had taken us months to win from him in 1916.

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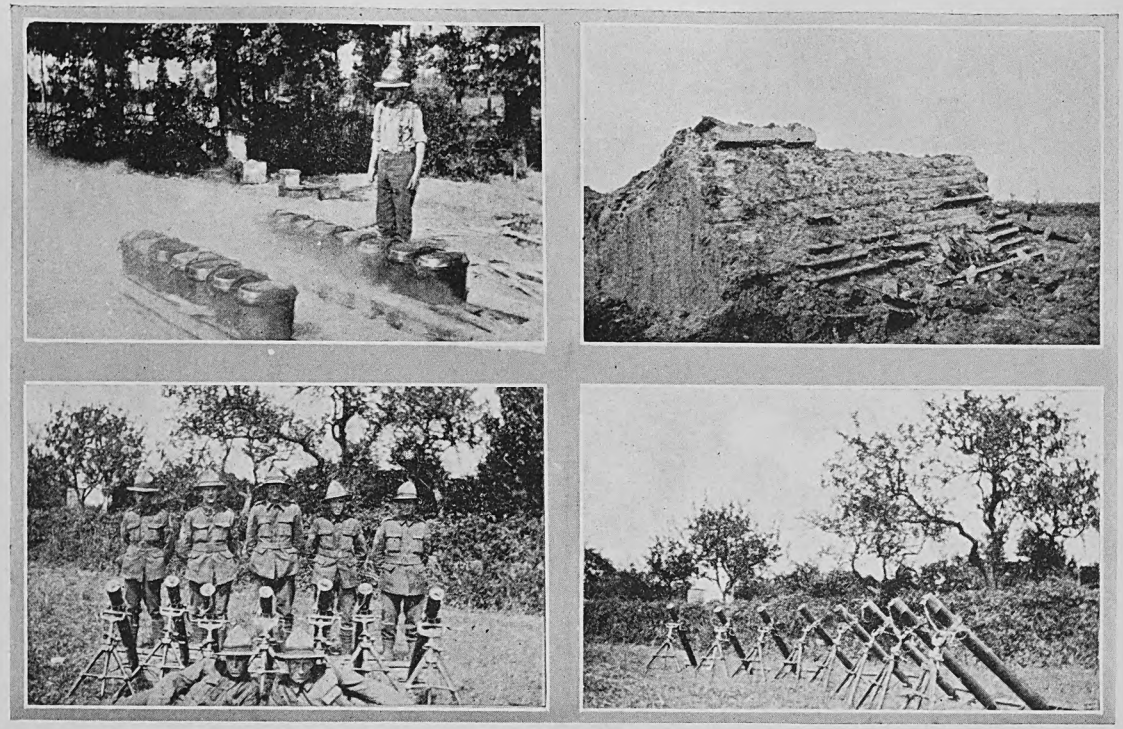

(1) Field Cookhouse, behind Messines. (2) German "Pillbox" after shelling by Trench Mortars.
(3) A 3rd Battery Group. (4) Guns of 3rd Battery set up.

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CHAPTER VIII

OFF TO THE SOMME ONCE MORE.

INSTANTLY obeying the call of duty, we soon were on the march to aid in stemming the tide of Germans now sweeping into the heart of La Belle France. After two weary days and nights, one night of which was spent in crowded cattle trucks, we came within striking distance of the Hun, not knowing quite how far he was away, and he being in the same case, not knowing our exact whereabouts. The 42nd Division had last been reported on the Bucquoy-Puisseaux Line, but the situation was obscure. However, the New Zealand Division had to push on and close the gap in the Allied line. This was successfully done by a composite brigade, consisting of the 1st and 2nd Auckland Battalions, the 2nd Wellington Battalion, and the 2nd Battalion of the N.Z. Rifle Brigade.

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The 2nd Battery had moved with their brigade to Mailly-Maillet to await ammunition after having marched from Morlancourt. This was a march that one is never likely to forget. The roads for many miles were almost blocked with thousands of troops, transport, and homeless civilians fleeing from the advancing Huns. These civilians were carrying their household goods, and accompanied by dogs, pigs, cows, fowls and, in fact, everything they could possibly take with them. Mailly was entirely deserted, though the inhabitants had left most of their belongings behind. The 2nd Battery remained at Courcelles till ammunition arrived. The presence of 14 chickens and a luscious pig in the vicinity set the men's mouths watering, and the battery butcher did neat execution, but in the middle of the feast the return of a refugee desiring to turn the battery out of his home caused some excitement.

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When ammunition arrived two guns went into the line with the right battalion and two with the left battalion. The line ran in front of Beaumont Hamel, and a couple of good "shoots" on to the Hun line were promptly carried out. At this time Captain Barton was in charge of the 2nd Battery, and this battery here put in some very good work.

The following four days—the 26th-30th March—were the hardest and most nerve-wracking for many of us in the whole war.

Where we made contact with the Hun was in a line of old trenches in front of Maillet, which were the old trenches the British used before the commencement of the Somme Battle in 1916.

As soon as the Hun found that he was meeting with opposition he attacked these trenches furiously and knocked about terribly the battalion that was holding the line, and our casualties were unfortunately heavy.

Our men were very tired after the long

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and arduous march of two days from Hangest Sur Somme, where most of the battalions were detrained, but the fighting put new life into them and made them even keener than fresh troops, as they knew that a very important task had been allotted to them, which was no less than to stop the Hun from breaking through to Doullens.

The 1st Battery had moved to Mailly-Maillet with the 1st Brigade at 2 p.m. on the 26th March, but no Stokes Mortar ammunition was available in the whole surrounding district, so that this battery was unable to assist the infantry in their attack on the enemy. At 3 a.m. on the 27th the battery was sent out to form three small outposts near the village of Englebelmer, but these posts were brought in at 8 a.m. There was still no Stokes Mortar ammunition available. The Stokes Mortars were continually asked for by battalions holding the line to blow out enemy machine guns that were troublesome, and as

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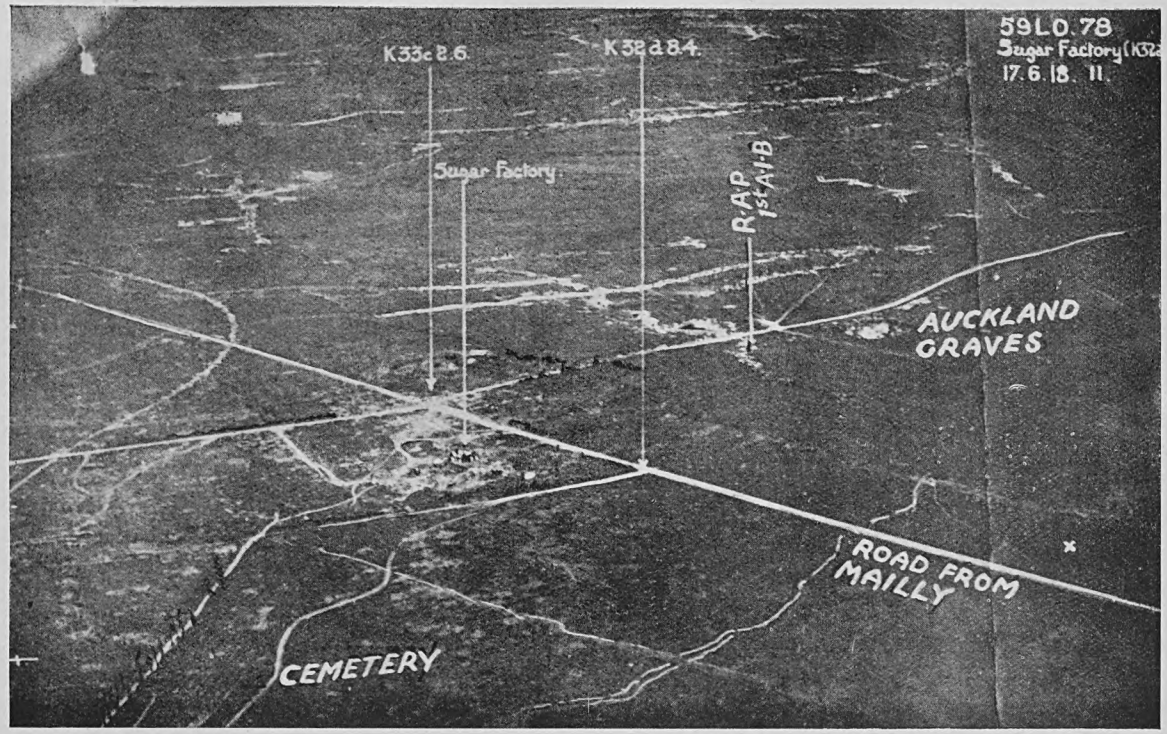

Aeroplane Photo. of Position at Mailly, where there was heavy fighting, 26th-30th March, 1918.

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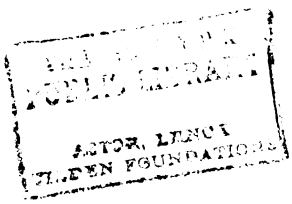

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no ammunition was available by the afternoon the battery moved back to Courcelles to await the arrival of ammunition. At last, on the afternoon of the 28th, the battery was ordered to rejoin the brigade immediately, as ammunition had at length arrived. We at once proceeded to Mailly Mallet. On the following morning six guns were in position on our front and 200 rounds per gun were placed on each gun position during the night.

On the 30th March one of the most important actions fought during the whole of these operations was the very successful attack on La Signy Farm, and the high ground in the vicinity. The Stokes Mortars played an important part in this action.

The attack was a well-conceived idea, in that it caught the Hun unprepared to a certain extent, as he never for a moment expected us to attack at 2 p.m. on a fine afternoon.

The Rifle Brigade, on the left, and 1st Brigade, on the right, were allotted the task

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of capturing the objectives. The attack was all over in a few minutes.

Much ammunition was taken forward, and two additional guns were placed in position in readiness to assist the Infantry in the attack. Six guns were on the 2nd Auckland Battalion front and two guns on the 1st Welligton Battalion front. The guns fired for three minutes and then advanced to support the Infantry. Corporal G. L. Stuart, with the extreme left gun, having found the 2nd Auckland held up, quickly came into action, and, after a few well-placed shells, about forty of the enemy surrendered. Six machine guns were captured in this post.

On the right of the attack a platoon of the 1st Wellington Battalion was held up by a German strong post, but Private W. E. Scott, seeing this, brought his gun into action at close range, and the enemy surrendered after a few shots, thus enabling the advance to proceed. Corporal Smylie and Corporal Bain

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also did excellent work in keeping down machine-gun fire with their respective guns. The remarkable feature of this stunt of the Stokes Mortars was that no casualties were suffered by the battery during the attack, but in the evening one man was killed and three wounded. The following day the guns were withdrawn, after doing very excellent work.

Colonel Allen, in his book "2/ Auckland, 1918," after reference to the beautifully accurate shooting of the five Stokes Mortars which put down a barrage in conjunction with the 18-pounders in this attack, goes on to describe the attack, and says:—

"For an attack I thought the three factors "to consider were the weather, the fatigue of "the men, and *an adequate supply of Stokes "Mortars.* I did not want to attack on a wet "day, which would impede movement in the "trenches, and the men were hourly getting "more tired; but, on the other hand, the pro- "vision of plenty of Stokes Mortars seemed

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"to me essential in attacking so strong a posi-
"tion. The General (General Melville)
"agreed with me.

"I thought the whole attack had succeeded
"when, about 2.15 p.m., I got a most illegible
"message from Captain McFarland, asking for
"assistance and saying a strong point at the
"end of Southern Avenue was still holding
"out. This point was important, because it
"was at the junction of the 3rd and 16th
"Companies' objectives, and one platoon of
"the 16th Company had been assigned for its
"capture. I sent for a platoon of the 15th
"Company, which was in readiness to rein-
"force up Southern Avenue, and immediately
"went up there myself with Captain Morgan
"(the officer who commanded the Stokes Mor-
"tars and referred to by Colonel Allen as an
"excellent officer), who volunteered to accom-
"pany me. As we got near the hedge we came
"on what I consider was the most ghastly
"sight I have ever seen in all my experience

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"in the War: fourteen dead and dying men of "the platoon of the 16th Company, all of "whom had been shot in the head as they tried "to climb out of the trench, and were now "lying in heaps at the bottom of it. Captain "McFarland himself was standing in the "trench with a nasty head wound. It ap- "peared that the Huns were still holding a "short length of the hedge and trench along "it, at a point where the trench was crossed "by a large culvert named Waterloo Bridge. "Here the Huns had several machine guns, "which had cut up this platoon of the 16th "Company. Prompt action was needed, and "a Stokes Mortar was the best weapon to dis- "lodge them with, and after getting one of "them into action the enemy post promptly "surrendered."

This brought the 16th Company in touch with the 3rd Company on their right. Thus, once again, the Stokes played its part well and made the linking-up of these two com-

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panies possible with the minimum of casualties.

On the 5th April, during the intense bombardment of our lines and back areas when the Hun attacked on that day, Lieutenant O'Connor, of this Battery, a very popular and efficient officer, was killed by shellfire at Auchonvillers.

This Hun bombardment was a terrific one, and started at 5.30 a.m. and lasted until 5 p.m., and under cover of this bombardment he launched a furious attack against us, but we were very lucky, for our casualties were slight and the Huns were driven back with heavy casualties and made no advance. At 10 a.m. 1st Canterbury put up the S.O.S., but the Artillery did not respond. However, the advancing Huns were scattered, and many were killed, by the prompt action of the 2nd Light Trench Mortars, only a few of the enemy getting back to their lines. The Infantry were very thankful for the prompt action of

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the Stokes, as undoubtedly many lives were saved.

This was the last bit of dash the Hun showed here, and he quietened down after this considerably.

On the 22nd April the 2nd Battery did two shoots on the Mound at La Signy Farm. They were both very successful, and the 12th Nelson Company raided Fritz, and during this tour in the line the 2nd Battery did some good straafing of Hun machine-gun and trench-mortar positions.

The 3rd Battery made its tour of the line from 1st to 6th May. On 2nd May one of this Battery's gun crews was engaged in anti-aircraft firing with one of their guns, which prematured and killed two of the gun crew that were feeding it. This was a very regrettable incident, and was hard to account for, as it was very seldom that a "premature" occurred, except in very cold weather.

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During the period of trench warfare following in this sector the trench mortars were very active, getting some good targets, and co-operated with the Artillery in firing on the Hun positions in Rossignol Wood, on the right of our position at Hebuterne, and they also did some very effective barrage work for the New Zealand Rifle Brigade when the latter made a fine stroke against the enemy in front of Hebuterne when they took Fusilier Trench.

This operation was the beginning of several small advances, ending with the squeezing of the Hun out of Rossignol Wood, which was a favourite target for the trench mortars, as well as the artillery, and entries in captured enemy diaries supplied convincing testimony of the miseries endured by the unfortunate Hun garrison of this wood, which had been shattered to pieces.

These operations against Rossignol Wood and the vicinity were carried out with much skill and determination, and with very few

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casualties, and were favourably commented on by the Army Commander through General Harper, the Corps Commander of the 4th Corps, to which the New Zealand Division was then attached. In a letter to General Russell, G.O.C. New Zealand Division, the Army Commander wrote:—

"I would ask you to convey to the G.O.C. New Zealand Division my sincere appreciation of the operations of that Division, which have led to the evacuation of Rossignol Wood and the adjoining trenches by the enemy. This operation, lasting over several days, has achieved a result which has reduced the extent of our front line and placed the enemy in an extremely difficult position. That this result has been obtained with few casualties, and without check, is due to the persistent enterprise on the part of all ranks and to thoughtful preparation and skilful leading on the part of commanders. The Division is to be warmly congratulated on its spirit and initiative, and

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I desire that all ranks should be informed of these few words of commendation and gratitude.—(Signed) J. BYNG, General Third Army."

These expressions of appreciation from the High Command were quite a tonic to the men, many of whom were becoming war-weary, but whenever there was a job of importance to be done they always rose to the occasion and did it to the best of their ability.

In the "History of the New Zealand Artillery" the author describes as follows the Divisional trench mortars, which were Stokes Mortars of a larger type than the three-inch, and were worked by the Artillery and were called six-inch Stokes (medium trench mortar):—

"Little reference has so far been made to the Divisional Trench Mortars, the unit formed almost on the eve of going into the line at Armentieres, but it must now be said that of such value did the Mortar Batteries prove that

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they came to be regarded as an indispensable factor in almost every enterprise undertaken by the Division. There were three of these medium batteries, each equipped with four medium Stokes Mortars, firing a 60-pound bomb. Their greatest usefulness lay in the very powerful support which they were able to lend to all the raiding and other trench activities of the Infantry, a usefulness to which the courage and devotion of the personnel contributed very materially. The mortars were mounted on solid wooden platforms set in the front line, from where they could be used to greater advantage as regards range and accuracy. They were used principally for wire-cutting and destroying enemy trenches, new works, and strong points. In preparing a gap in the wire for a raid, the spot selected would be ranged on in the day-time, and the same night, very shortly before the raid, the wire-cutting would commence. This method, if successful, and it generally

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was, had obvious advantages over the cutting of the wire by 18-pounders in broad daylight. In addition, the mortars nearly always directly supported the raid, either by firing on the enemy front line, on either flank of the section or trench being raided, or by creating a diversion at another point. The work was arduous, involving a great deal of hard physical labour; fresh gun positions had frequently to be constructed, and all the ammunition had to be carried from the dump, somewhere near the subsidiary line, although in this latter task the Infantry helped with carrying parties."

Before the invention of the six-inch Stokes these Medium Trench Mortar Batteries used what was well-known to the New Zealand Division as the "plum duffs." These were a medium trench mortar firing a big round iron bomb like a plum pudding, filled with high explosive, and on the base was affixed a steel rod which contained the propelling charge.

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These trench mortars were used for all the purposes mentioned above, but were erratic, and very often the rods came off and flew back when the bomb burst, and were liable to injure our own men. These were abolished as soon as the larger six-inch Stokes was found to be a success.

In addition we had in the Division the 9.45 trench mortars commonly known as the "flying pigs," and these were used also for wire-cutting and destroying strong points and trenches, but they were not mobile, and could not be used in the advance, as they took about six hours to get into position and register, and during the latter stages of the War the advance was too rapid for them to be of any use, but prior to the Battle of Messines they were used in trench warfare in a number of sectors very effectively.

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CHAPTER IX

THE ACTION OF MORTARS

(Generally in the Advance)

LIGHT mortar detachments were generally detailed to move forward in rear of the leading assaulting battalions and, as far as possible, adopted the formation of the assaulting waves of infantry. The actual position occupied by detachments in the course of the advance was determined by the nature of the opposition expected, the condition of the ground, and the distance to be covered. It had to be borne in mind that the battery personnel and attached carrying parties carried heavy loads and could not advance as rapidly as the infantry.

The mortar was brought into action against machine guns, strong points, and any other form of opposition that temporarily

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checked the advance. The supply of ammunition that could be carried forward was, as above stated, limited; this was especially so at the Battle of Gravenstafel, owing to the terrible state of the ground, which was mostly bogs, and the mortar was only called upon for assistance when the normal weapons of the Infantry soldier proved ineffective. When the mortar was brought into action in these circumstances it was essential that the closest understanding should exist between the trench mortar detachments and the infantry detailed to attack the position. Generally a short hurricane bombardment was begun, during which the attacking party advanced as near their objective as possible and waited in shell holes, and then a determined rush of the Infantry with the bayonet succeeded in overcoming the opposition. Battery officers always endeavoured to keep in touch with the situation and be prepared on their own initiative to render assistance wherever it was obviously required.

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This could only be done by careful reconnaissance well in advance of the actual position of the mortars. As soon as the objective was captured the mortars, with the leading battalions, took up positions covering points of tactical importance and dug in their guns, to be ready to fire, upon S.O.S. signals being given in case of a counter-attack by the enemy, and in such a case the mortars put up a barrage from 25 to 50 yards in front of our position on the front attacked.

As soon as possible after the objectives were captured forward dumps of ammunition were established at previously selected points, and thus the position of the infantry was made more secure.

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CHAPTER X

THE FINAL STAGES OF THE WAR

On the 1st June, while the 1st Battery was covering our front, at 3.30 a.m. the S.O.S. went up from our front line and was followed by intense gunfire for about forty minutes. The mortars tested the S.O.S. line, firing a considerable number of rounds, and this fire was beautifully distributed about forty yards in front of our position all along the line. At daybreak a dense cloud of smoke was seen rising from the enemy lines, rendered it probable that a dump of some description had been blown up by our fire. No attack was made by the enemy, however, and so, by way of a little reminder that we were still there, in the afternoon the Stokes fired a number of rounds at various Hun posts, and direct hits were obtained and the enemy were observed removing their wounded.

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The continuous harassing fire of the Stokes Mortars day after day told very severely on the Huns opposed to us at this point and affected their morale considerably, as we learned from time to time from prisoners who were captured.

On the 2nd July the 3rd Battery relieved the 172nd Light Trench Mortar Battery in the centre sector of the 4th Corps' front near Hebuterne, and during this period of their tour in the line they conducted a number of very successful shoots on Fusilier Trench and on enemy dugouts and machine guns.

On the 20th July, during the night, Fritz evacuated Rossignol Wood, the position near Hebuterne above referred to, blowing up his pill-boxes and dug-outs before leaving. Our Trench Mortars (2nd Battery) followed behind our reconnoitring patrols, which were sent out, our orders being to give them covering fire if necessary until they obtained touch with the enemy. Twenty rounds were fired

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on enemy machine guns, completely silencing them in each instance.

The following night—21st—and again on the following morning the Hun heavily shelled our new position, and while two guns and teams were returning after a shoot a stray shell landed amongst them, killing two men and wounding four others.

On the 24th, at 5 p.m., the 2nd Battery put over 500 rounds as a barrage for the Infantry advance, and the Hun retaliated heavily during the night, when two more members of this Battery were killed.

On the 25th the Hun directed an attack against our line just as our relief was taking place, and attempted to retake our previous day's captured positions. His attack was unsuccessful, and he had a bad time of it with the barrage put down in response to our S.O.S.

During the period just mentioned a number of Americans were attached to the various

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batteries for training in the work of the trench mortars in the line, and showed considerable aptitude after a few days' experience.

On the 14th August, after a very quiet week in the line (at this period the 2nd Battery was covering our front) it was discovered that the enemy had evacuated his forward positions, and during the day our mortars moved forward with the Infantry, giving covering fire where necessary, and at about 6 p.m. twenty rounds were fired on an enemy post before it was rushed by the Infantry. The Infantry then consolidated their line of posts, and the mortars registered on an S.O.S. line covering the advanced outposts.

The following day was a busy one chasing Huns and getting shells forward to the guns. The 2nd Battery captured a machine gun. The advance was not going to be a walkover, however, as the following day, the 16th, a number of trench mortar gunners were wounded.

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This preliminary advance, however, was only preparatory to the big Allied offensive, rumours of which had reached our ears, and on the 29th August the great offensive commenced, which was not to stop until the end of the War.

This offensive was the one we had all dreamed of and hoped for and talked about for years, but wondered how long it would be in coming and what a great one it was to be.

The next serious fighting the Stokes came in for was in the open fighting in the attack on Baupaume, and here a number of casualties were suffered.

On the 26th August the 3rd Battery set out from their brigade for Grevillers, arriving there about 11 p.m., and went into the line with six guns, and the following day went forward at zero with the Infantry, meeting with little opposition from the enemy. During the attack at Baupaume on 1st September by the 1st Battery N.Z.R.B. one gun of the

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3rd Battery fired fifteen rounds on to an enemy machine gun and crew, killing the latter and putting the gun out of action.

In the succeeding operations in September the 3rd Battery had a severe task in the Havrincourt Wood operation on the 12th, when they fired 360 rounds during the opening bombardment to assist the advance of the 2nd and 4th Battalions N.Z.R.B.

The Infantry were now closely pursuing the Hun, and on the 14th the New Zealand Division were relieved and full advantage was taken of the rest. At the end of the month (27th) the news was very good, the advance was still going well and everyone was in good spirits and fit again after the spell.

The 2nd October found the 2nd Trench Mortar Battery in the old Hindenburg support line with its battery headquarters in one of the famous Hun concrete dugouts. This was the day that made us feel as if things were going exceptionally well with us, as we received

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the news of Bulgaria's unconditional surrender to the Allies. The following day we heard St. Quentin had fallen and Cambrai was noticed to be on fire, and on the 5th the Bosche was reported to be retiring everywhere.

On the 8th October the 3rd and 4th Armies resumed the attack, and of the New Zealand Division the 2nd and 3rd Brigades attacked. Eight of the guns of the 2nd Light Trench Mortar Battery put down a barrage on the enemy's forward defences at zero hour, and on the Infantry moving forward the guns were loaded on limbers, moved forward, and consolidated with the Infantry on reaching the final objectives, and during the night some of the guns were moved further forward to assist the Brigade in the attack on the following morning, the task of the mortars being to barrage a ravine which favoured the enemy as a line of approach for counter-attacks.

When the attack was launched the following morning it was found that Fritz was re-

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treating all along the line with us in close pursuit. On we went on the 10th in our pursuit, some of the batteries camping for the night in Beauvois in houses which had been well ransacked by the Huns before leaving. A number of French civilians were met who had been hiding in cellars for the last ten days, and they were truly delighted to see the "diggers" come along, as these unfortunate people had been without food for several days. They were invited to tea with our 2nd Battery, a kindness which they greatly appreciated, and our men were very happy to share their rations with these poor homeless French people, for whom we had a great regard and sympathy. What a wonderful race the French are! How tenacious! How buoyant! They never left their homes until they knew it was hopeless to remain, and often we found them still in their little homes in villages under very heavy shell fire.

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CONCLUSION.

What a contrast these days of open warfare were to the months of monotony in the Ypres Salient, which was rightly named the Graveyard of Flanders. The thoughts that ran through the minds of many were, "Oh, if our pals who went West in the earlier days of trench warfare could only be here now, how they would revel in this kind of war!"

In open warfare one got a run for one's money (to use a racing expression), but in trench warfare you did not, as you very seldom saw the Hun, and he very seldom saw you; and yet daily on both sides many were killed and wounded. The initiative of our diggers was brought out in the open warfare more than it had ever been brought out before, and gave the individual soldier a chance to prove his worth. The men realised this, and in consequence there are recorded in all the

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works of the different branches of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force many of the brave deeds of our men, some of which were recognised by authority, and hundreds of which passed without any recognition.

On the 4th November the 1st and 4th Armies resumed the attack, the barrage from hundreds of guns of every calibre, machine guns and trench mortars opening up punctually at 5.30 a.m., the task of the 1st and 2nd Light Trench Mortar Batteries being to straafe some forward machine-gun positions of the Hun.

The New Zealand Division attacked in conjunction with the 37th Division on the right and the 62nd on the left. The 1st and 3rd Brigades were the assaulting brigades. The 3rd Brigade captured the fortified town of Le Quesnoy during the afternoon, and the 2nd Brigade advanced through the 1st Brigade. The capture of this important fortified town was a fitting end to the part New Zealand

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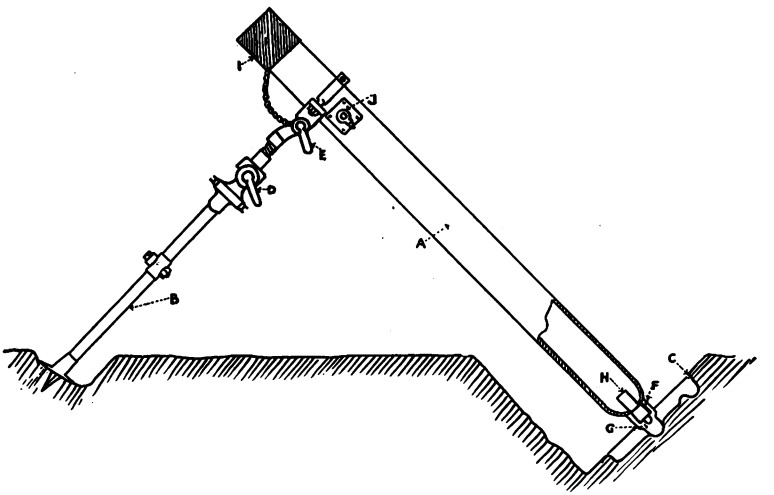

Sketch of Mortar, set up.

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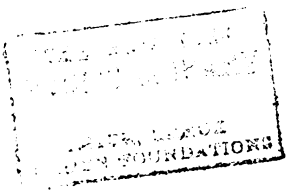

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played on the battlefields of France and Belgium.

The 1st and 2nd Batteries remained at Le Quesnoy until the 11th November. On the 10th November the President of France, M. Poincarè, visited the town and congratulated the inhabitants on their deliverance. On the 11th a move was made to Beauvois, where word was received that the Armistice was signed. The feelings of the troops were those of joy, disappointment, and sorrow—joy for the knowledge that Europe was freed from the yoke of the Teuton Beast that sought "world power or downfall," disappointment that we had not gone on a short time longer and entered Germany to teach the Hun civilians that Germany had really been vanquished, and sorrow for those dear comrades who had not lived to see the day of our success, and who had fought and laid down their lives so nobly in the fight for "Right against Might." They gave their lives that we might live and that

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our great Empire should still endure, and God in His Goodness has taken them into His Kingdom. Their names liveth for evermore.

This completes my imperfect narrative of the deeds of the men of the Trench Mortars in the War. A new adaptation of an age-old weapon, the mortars, as will be seen from the foregoing, rendered important services in the great conflict, which were not surpassed by those artillery weapons which were the last word in modern scientific achievement. In rapidity of movement, promptitude of fire, effectiveness in destroying obstacles to the advance, and the devastation they created in the Hun ranks and positions, those unpretentious engines of war deservedly earned the admiration and even the affection of the men by whom they were controlled.

Finis.

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